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For More Information Contact

Larry Hill, VDH, (757) 683-9175

FISH KILLS IN EASTERN VIRGINIA NOT PFIESTERIA RELATED

(RICHMOND, Va.)— Scientists from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) and Old Dominion University (ODU) have determined that fish kills on the Back River, the Poquoson River, and the East River in late March were not related to *Pfiesteria*. From March 25 to March 30, a series of fish kills were reported by the public and investigated by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

Around the same time, VIMS scientists also discovered and tested an algal bloom on the York River at the mouth of Taskinas Creek. Water samples from the algal bloom revealed high levels of *Pfiesteria shumwayae* at that time. Subsequent tests on water samples from the York River detected little or no concentration of the *Pfiesteria* organism.

“After thorough analysis of the water samples, scientists concluded that there are no current health risks from *Pfiesteria* in the waters where the fish kills and algal bloom were found. The fish kills were likely a naturally occurring event,” said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. “We will continue to monitor these areas to ensure that the health and safety of our citizens is protected.”

Pfiesteria shumwayae is one of several different species of *Pfiesteria*. *Pfiesteria* organisms are dinoflagellates, microscopic organisms that sometimes behave like a plant and sometimes like an animal. When dinoflagellates reproduce to huge numbers they can cause a discoloration of the water, often referred to as a "red tide." Most red tides do not harm humans or fish, however they can cause a nuisance when they die and reduce the oxygen in the water to a point where large numbers of fish die.

The reddish water found in the York River, indicative of algal bloom activity, dissipated in less than a week after it was discovered and has not returned. No additional algal blooms or fish kills have been reported or discovered since that time.

The findings from the fish kills and the algal bloom were reported to the Harmful Algal Bloom Task Force, the interagency group in Virginia responsible for responding to harmful algal blooms in Virginia waters. The task force includes representatives from Department of Environmental Quality, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), the Marine Resources Commission, VIMS and ODU.

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People should take the following precautions to avoid exposure to harmful algal blooms and fish kills:

- Do not swim in or drink water from areas where an algal bloom has been identified, even if the water looks clear.
- Keep pets and livestock away from bloom areas. Algal blooms may contain a toxin harmful to pets and livestock, although these effects have not been found in association with *Pfiesteria*.
- Internal organs) of fish and crabs caught in bloom waters should not be eaten. After cleaning fish taken from affected waters, thoroughly wash any skin that has come into contact with the fish.

For more information about harmful algal blooms, log onto:

http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/whc/external_whc/HarmfulAlgalBloomsExternal%20Web.asp

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